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ABSTRACT

A study focused on a 2-year collaboration involving teachers and students from one bilingual and one English as a Second Language (ESL) class (grades 7-9) in an inner New York City middle school with a large population of immigrants from the Dominican Republic. Most of the children interviewed had adopted their parents' dream of returning to the Dominican Republic at a later time. The research goal was to develop an instructional activity that would call upon the students' strengths, their knowledge of their own culture, literature, and literacy, and would engage them in meaningful productions for which they could claim ownership, and through this gain higher literacy. To achieve this end, the research team developed a book-writing project anchored in a social and activity-based view of learning and understanding. The student-authored book was to be for future limited English proficient students from the Dominican Republic to use, a book that could be placed in classrooms as well as in libraries. The stories contained in it would come from the students' own lives; the students would tape record and eventually write down stories they had heard from home. Results were satisfactory. Second-language students are often unable to engage in extended literacy activities, but in this case, their literacy skills from their native country were used to give them a sense of accomplishment, value, and confidence. (Contains 26 references.) (TB)

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Literacy Acquisition Through Literature

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Literacy Acquisition Through Literature

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Literacy Acquisition Through Literature

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Since 1987, through my work at the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning (now expanded to the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA)), I have been studying the contribution that literature can make to students' thoughtful reasoning and higher literacy. As we are constantly reminded in the popular press, we are living in an increasingly international time. More and more students across the United States are in schools with classmates from a variety of cultures, who speak a variety of languages. Too often, students, particularly among poor under served minorities, face limited success in doing school, either in their first language, or in English (Langer, Applebee, Mullis, Foertsch, 1990; McLeod, 1994; NCES, 1993). We, as reading and English language arts educators, are faced with meeting the demands of effective literacy education for increasingly diverse populations. Although a growing number of studies have been focusing on the literacy learning of non-English-speaking students (Block, 1986; Heath & Mangiola, 1991; Jiminez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1995; Langer, Bartolome, Vasquez, & Lucas, 1990; Lucas, 1993; Morrow, Sharkey, & Firestone, 1993; Perez, 1994; Reyes, 1993), we as a profession have much learning to do.

For three years, my project team at SUNY has been building on our earlier work on literary understanding and literature instruction. In the earlier years, we worked collaboratively in urban and suburban schools, particularly in mainstream monolingual classes. From these studies we saw that literature can be a particularly inviting way for students to reflect on their lives, their learning, and their language -- to engage in literate activity. When students read literature, "horizons of possibility" come to mind, moving them to reflect on and interpret ideas at hand; students raise questions, recognize problems, seek causes and solutions, and make connections. They explore multiple perspectives and imagine scenarios. This type of thinking is at the heart of literate thought. In close collaboration with teachers across the grades, we were able to describe features of "envisionment-building classrooms" that support students to engage in this kind of rich literary understanding. My book, *Envisioning Literature* (Langer, 1995), provides a comprehensive overview of this work.

In recent years, we have begun to focus on classes of linguistically and culturally diverse students, studying ways in which literature can support students' acquisition of literacy using their knowledge of their first language, literature, and culture as leverage toward increased literacy (Jiminez, 1994; Langer, 1990). Every student has a storehouse of literature potentially available to call upon. This may include religious, cultural, family, or friendship tales, traditions, or lore -- formal or informal stories shared and learned with others. We saw this knowledge as a potential strength to be tapped, a strength through which students can learn to reason about the content and also extend their use of the skills and strategies involved in literacy.

We began the current study with some underlying assumptions about literacy and literature

education that have filled the first and second language literature at least across the past 20 years (for example, Cazden, 1988; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Dyson, 1993; Krashen, 1982; Langer, 1995; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). These assumptions include: 1) Literacy learning is dependent upon the uses and forms of literacy that people in particular cultures and social traditions deem valuable. Thus, connection to the community is critical. 2) Second language learners use their knowledge of their first language and culture (as well as their second) to help them understand and communicate. 3) Students learn best when they are engaged in full activities instead of exercises, activities that they themselves find meaningful. When students engage in such literacy activities, with support from others, they eventually learn how to "do literacy" on their own. 4) Students learn best by integrating new knowledge into what they already know, and new skills into routines they already know how to perform. Second language learners know some of their own language and conventions, and some ways to make them work. 5) Because it taps what they know and who they are, literature is a particularly inviting context for learning both a second language and literacy.

Through collaborative work with a number of teachers and students in urban schools, we explored activities and approaches to literacy instruction that actively engage students in "literacy through literature." The teachers wished to develop activities that engaged their students in language and literacy learning and we wished to study the ways in which those classroom events, interactions, and learnings affected literacy learning. In this article, I will focus on a two-year collaboration involving the teachers and students from one bilingual and one ESL class (grades 7-9) in an inner New York City middle school with a large population of immigrants from the Dominican Republic. During the first year of the study, we learned about the community and students; during the second year, we worked with the teachers and students to develop engaging literature/literacy activities, and studied what worked best.

The Community

To gain an understanding of the community in which the school existed we relied heavily on Elba Herrero, a project researcher who is herself from the Dominican Republic. One of the teachers, Herlinda Suarez, was a local resident. The community, on New York's lower east side, was originally built during the industrial revolution. (There is a second Dominican community in New York, but it is primarily inhabited by families who are economically "better off.") Tenement buildings, warehouses, a few scattered factories, and multi-family dwellings line its tar pitched and cobblestone streets. Graffiti and colorfully painted signs cover many outside doors, walls and metal grillwork. People chat on street corners, and dirt lots have been turned into colorful gardens with painted sheds and awnings.

For the past century and a half, changes in population have always reflected this area's role as home to the latest and poorest of the city's newcomers from around the world. It has always been something of a cultural ghetto for successive waves of language minority and ethnic groups -- one predominant group trying to move out and "up" being replaced by newer arrivals from another part of the world. At the time of our study, the area's residents were primarily from the Dominican Republic; their children constituted 80% of the school's population. The signs and

markings on the buildings reflected other cultures in the neighborhood's past, but the factories and stores were now mixed with bodegas, and most shops had Spanish-speaking employees. Newcomers from Bangladesh were rapidly moving in.

Our interviews with students, parents, and community members helped us understand that this Dominican community was made up primarily of industrious and hard working people who had come to the United States for economic reasons. Most often, both parents worked, and about half of the middle school students we studied held part time jobs. Yet, 83% of the children in the school were categorized as low income. The families seemed closely knit and spent much time together. Most of the students and adults told us they loved the Dominican Republic and considered it home; they would like to return some day. Many families had kept their old family homes in the Dominican Republic, and some of them were in the process of building or improving homes there, even as they lived and worked in New York.

The Students and School

Most of the children we interviewed had taken on their parents' dream of returning to the Dominican Republic when they get older. It is not surprising, then, that most of the students said they did not leave their neighborhood. They developed close friendships within and across neighboring families, and at school many students seemed to care for one another. Students told us they want to make money, but rarely do they think beyond getting a high school diploma. The high school in their neighborhood is known for violence and high drop-out rates, yet, despite open enrollment and counseling to help them find a school suited to their interests or job goals, very few students from this neighborhood choose to enroll in another high school.

The school was one of the lowest performing in the city. It is in a crime infested community, plagued by drugs and violence. Crack cocaine vials crunch underfoot in lots, alleys and the schoolyard, and drug wars have taken the lives of too many residents. Shots from guns and the wail of police sirens are everyday sounds, background noise. During the school day, the doors are locked and windows barricaded. Guards walk the corridors with walkie-talkies to announce and protect those who should be in the school building and keep others out. Some of the 13- to 15- year- old girls were pregnant, and it was not uncommon for a student we interviewed to have a child at home cared for by a mother or grandmother. A student was stabbed to death in a nearby classroom during the time of our project.

Teachers and Classrooms

We collaborated with two teachers and their classes, one an ESL (English as a Second Language) bridge class with English as the language of instruction, and the other a 9th-grade bilingual class with Spanish used as the language of discourse and English as the target language to be learned. All students were from the Dominican Republic and had been categorized as Limited English Proficient based on language tests administered across the city. The students had been in the United States from 1 to 5 years.

The teachers who volunteered to work with us wanted to experiment with using literature as a way to "reach" their students and help them gain literacy. Both said they had rejected the "high interest-low readability" stories and biographies of "successful minority figures" as "unreadable and undiscussable." Both had tried to use original literature as a way to help their students "see themselves" at school but could not find much material by or about people from the Dominican Republic. Although there is more written by and about people from Puerto Rico, the teachers felt there is a tension between the two cultures "back home as well as in the United States" and that texts "closer to the students" were needed.

The Project

Our research team's goal was to develop an instructional activity that would call upon the students' strengths -- their knowledge of their own culture (to which, as I'v noted, they were deeply tied), literature, and literacy and would engage them in meaningful productions for which they could claim ownership, and through them gain higher literacy. To achieve this, we developed a book-writing project anchored in a social and activity-based view of learning and understanding (i.e., Bakhtin, 1981; Leont'ev, 1981; Vygotsky, 1962). Here, students were invited to participate in a book writing project that came to span almost an entire school year (although we never planned it that way).

The goal of the activity was for the students to write a book for future Limited English Proficient students from the Dominican Republic (students like themselves) to use -- a book that could be placed in classrooms as well as in school and community libraries. To be most interesting to themselves and others, the stories would grow from the students' own lives -- the students would collect, tell, tape record, and eventually write stories they had heard or told, "stories from home." For authenticity, they were asked to make every effort to keep their stories as close to the original as possible. To be helpful to its future readers, the book would include both Spanish and English versions of each story, but first the students would have to learn to tell the stories as they might be told at home.

Writing the Stories

We wished to help the students learn to work in collaborative peer groups (they had not done this before), providing help to each other about their developing stories, with guidance from their teachers about what to look for and how to best help. We believed that through peer group collaboration and discussion, students would gain opportunities to 1) observe, reflect on, and manipulate ideas, language, and text; 2) create scaffolds for themselves as well as others; 3) check the effectiveness of their own understanding and learning; and 4) practice (and eventually internalize) routines that work. Thus, the literacy activities we planned involved speaking, writing, and reading in both languages, as well as polishing the prose into a form appropriate for publication. The teachers worked together, we all met together as a full project team, and Elba Herrero spent a good deal of time during class and after school, reflecting on and discussing with

the teachers ways to support the students' efforts and "keep them going." This is the sequence of the project as the students and teachers experienced it:

1) Learn a story. Discuss favorite stories with the people at home (most of the students lived in family groupings). They can be stories a grandparent or parent or aunt or uncle told when you were young; ones you've heard told a number of times about your country or family; ones you've heard or told with your friends. If you can't find a story, make one up. If you can, practice the story with someone who told it or knows it to make sure they think you've "got it right."
2) Tape record it for self-review.
3) When you're ready, tell it to your "writing group," for feedback.
4) Revise and retell it until you and others feel it "sounds right."
5) When you're ready, write it in the language of your choice.
6) Get feedback from your group. Redraft and get feedback as often as needed.
7) Translate to the other language.
8) Polish both versions, Spanish and English, for publication.

Every step of the way, students were reminded to do all they could on their own, and to continually seek help and feedback when they thought it might be helpful. Some students were more proficient in English than others. Some knew the stories, words, or linguistic features others sought. Some were good spellers in one or the other language. Throughout, when feedback or particular help was needed, the students themselves decided who to turn to; sometimes it was a classmate, sometimes a parent, sometimes an older student, sometimes another person at school. The helpers varied based on the stage of the students' writing and the kind of expertise they felt they needed.

The teachers taught the students some guidelines to use in reviewing their own stories as well as when working as editors on other students' work:

Content:

1. Is there anything missing that needs to be added?
2. Is there anything confusing that needs to be made clearer?
3. Has anything been said more than once and needs to be deleted?
4. Is there anything that needs to be developed more in order to understand it better?

Genre:

1. What type of story is this? What could be changed or added to make it more like that kind of story? What needs to be changed to make it more like a "cuentista?" More like a "fabula?"
2. Are there any special ways to begin a piece of this kind? If you heard it on the radio or read it in a book, what would be different?
3. What can you change to make it more like your "original" (e.g., your grandmother) would have told it? Does anything need to be changed in the beginning, middle or end? In the words you use? In the feeling or mood?

Presentation:

1. What changes can be made in the words, sentences, or organization of the story to help a reader follow and understand it better?
2. What do you think needs to be checked before your story is ready for publication? Look at the spelling, punctuation, and layout. Make the changes you can, and mark anything you aren't sure of to check out with someone else.

The Project-in-Action

It was difficult getting started. At first the students did not know what kind of story their teachers were after, but they heard models. The teachers told their own folk tales and stories. Ms. De Vito told her "funny hat" story, that she said really happened when she was on a trip with a friend of hers and was about such a funny event that she's told it many times. Soon the students brought in their own stories, and the writing groups began to meet. Some of the students' stories were like novellas, some racy cuentos, some of spiritual possession; some were folk tales about Pepito and Juan Bobo. All were stories the students either knew or were familiar with in content and structure. Over time, the students' engagement grew rather than diminished. They worked and reworked their stories; some revised their stories as many as five times. In class, the writing activity was interspersed with readings, books and stories by such authors as Sandra Cisneros, Nicolassa Mohr, and Danny Santiago, as well as stories from their own anthologies. Here, the students "lived through" the literature, shared their responses, took multiple perspectives, and discussed their interpretations. Then they would also distance themselves and reflect as critics, just as they were doing in their writing groups, with each others' stories.

The students sought help from others, outside the class. Some students who had been in these teachers' classes in years past joined in to help. The librarian and teaching aides from other classes were asked to help. Excitement spread. Once final drafts had been completed in both languages, photographs were taken of each student, and each wrote a brief biography for the book. Many people were asked to help edit the final version -- other teachers, students, outside reviewers. And each student considered and incorporated the editing suggestions that were offered. The principal was delighted with the "community feel" of the school and suggested that a schoolwide evening fair be held for the parents, and the students could illustrate their stories, line them on the school's halls, and tell them to passers-by. He invited other classes to plan "galas." One class developed a subway train tour of New York City, using the school hallways as the train tunnel; another gave dancing lessons, with music filling the halls.

The stories were published in a book and are distributed at cost by the Center, called *Tales from Home/ Cuentos de Mi Herencia* (National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, 1994). The students' photos form a collage on the front and back cover. Here is one story, by Illeana Tejeda. It uses the magic realism so frequently depicted in literature from the Dominican Republic.

The Treasure/ La Botija

It was a long time ago that in a dreamed up countryside there was a man who was called Chelo. He was my grandmother's friend. He did not like to do anything. He only like to search for gold and go fishing. But, something very terrible happened. One day he was searching for gold and the river's water was rising, and suddenly he slipped and fell into the river and drowned.

But as you know, people of long ago used to bury their money. This man Chelo was one of those people. He had left his money buried so that no person could put a hand on his money or gold until one day, after his death, he could not keep it buried any longer. So, one night he went to give the money to my abuelita because she was like a daughter to him. She took care of him.

Let me tell you something, he was a man who would not tell anyone how much money he had. Only my abuelita. That is why he wanted her to have the jug. She was so good to him.

When my abuelita was eight months pregnant, Chelo's ghost wanted to tell her about the jug. The ghost would pull her sheet every night, but my abuelita did not believe in ghosts, so she would ignore him. Until one night, the ghost grabbed her by the neck and told her he had something for her and her children. He told her to look under a huge rock close to the house.

But when my abuelita went to look for the jug, she had gone with my grandfather, and Chelo would not show her where it was. In other words, he tricked my grandfather, so that he would leave. Ghosts don't like selfish people. And since my grandfather was selfish, Chelo did not want to show him where the jug had been hidden.

One night Chelo's ghost cast a spell over my grandfather that made him sleep deeply. He told my abuelita to go alone and find the jug.

My abuelita imagined that all the things Chelo had told her were in her dreams, so she told someone in her family. Later in the night, the ghost told her that the things he said to her should not be revealed to anyone else. The jug was given to someone in Chelo's family, and not to my abuelita.

Illeana told us this was the first story she had ever written. The initial oral story she told her writing group was very brief, with much critical information left out. Over time, she learned to include enough content to make her story understood by others who did not know it. She also spent a great deal of time learning to organize her piece. Most impressive was the progress she experienced in English vocabulary, structure, and presentation -- all by way of intending to make her story more readable for others. Although she still has more to learn about such things as plot development and paragraphing, she (and her teacher) felt her learning was extraordinary.

Changes During the Project

Through the Tales from Home activity, the students became a community of learners who came to work better with each other. They came to see that although the students were all working toward a common goal -- the book -- each had room to pursue that goal in his or her own way, with his or her own story. The common goal created an opportunity for students to learn some common strategies and techniques for telling and writing their stories; these common strategies and techniques were the guidelines their teachers offered. As students used these guidelines to critique and revise their classmate's stories, they were also learning to critique and revise their own. The students also learned new things about literature and literacy by building on what they already knew. They knew, albeit tacitly, some things about the genre conventions exemplified in the stories they chose. As they learned to reflect on the content, structure and presentation of those stories, they gained control -- related to both language and literacy. In addition, students learned to use this literacy knowledge in response to the stories and books they read. As their teachers helped them tap into their growing ability to make textual critiques, they began to make distinctions among " family talk," "classroom talk," and published "book language." Students began to talk about stories (in either language) in a more academic way.

Our analyses of the class activities and the students' writing and participation over time indicate that: 1) The students were improving in Spanish literacy and gaining English literacy; they were learning to gain control of their own oral and written products and understandings in both languages. 2) They were gaining metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness as they came to inspect oral and written texts, reflecting on and changing them. They were learning to reflect on their own understandings and their own writing, and to make revisions for a variety of purposes, including the demands of the genre. 3) They were learning to communicate and reflect as well as to explain and defend their own interpretations, and to be sensitive to other well-argued interpretations. 4) Differencs in languages and cultural interaction styles offered rich opportunities for the students to discuss and come to recognize discourse differences. Discussions of slang and idiomatic expressions in both languages helped the students become aware of language choices and their effects on the story, and ways in which they could control them. Differing literary and organizational traditions were also discussed (e.g., the content and structures often associated with magic realism). 5) The students sometimes helped each other more than their teachers did, because they were often more able to tell what a student intended to say, and thus provide clearer direction on how to improve the piece. Over time, students learned to make better choices about who might best help them, for their particular purposes. 6) The students also gained an "ear." They learned how to hear and read their pieces for content, organization, and finally for presentation and to note the parts that didn't "sound right." When they could, they made corrections on their own, but otherwise they sought out and learned from others. Thus, they learned about text construction and the reader/writer interaction, what it takes to get a message across, and how to interpret a piece..

Discussion

What is special about all that I have described? Students like those we studied are often treated as if they are unable to engage in extended literacy activities because they lack the knowledge and skills with English that such activities require. Instead, they are often given short passages and fill-in exercises meant to develop their English skills before being provided with contexts that permit them to use those skills in interesting and meaningful ways. The kinds of learning and accomplishments that are described in mainstream monolingual classrooms are often deemed as inappropriate and inaccessible, yet in this project we found that the characteristics of effective envisionment building classrooms derived from earlier studies (Langer, 1995) held up very well. The key was the recognition that the students did in fact have a great deal of knowledge about language and story, knowledge that provided a powerful starting point for discussion and reflection in English as well as in Spanish. The students were provided with systematic ways of reflecting on ideas they had ownership for and wanted to hone. The product-based activity and the kind of help given provided support for the students that helped them through the process. In my earlier studies, I found that the most useful support teachers offer focuses on "ways to discuss" and "ways to think." This project provided the students with both kinds of support, and with an opportunity to reflect on the content and message of their own stories -- fostering literacy acquisition through literature. Students had practice, encouragement, and support in using literate strategies in their own reading and writing and in responding to others, over extended periods of time. And they came to see how these strategies made a difference in creating the kind of book they themselves wanted. These were strategies they could internalize and use for their own purposes, even when their teachers were no longer around.

As Ms. Suarez said at the end of the project:

> Not only has their reading changed, but their writing has changed over the school year as well. The stories they write now have sequence - beginnings, middles, and endings. They elaborate more in their writing than they did at the beginning of the year. More importantly, they know how to talk about their writing in different ways than they did earlier in the year. When they read one of their classmate's stories, they zero in on the problems. "Something's missing, you don't have the sequence right. Does that character have a name? You've got to get me into the story," they say. At the beginning of the year they wouldn't have been able to focus on distinctive things. Now they know how to be critics -- and they also read and write better.

Note: I would like to extend my deepest thanks to the teachers and students involved in this study. Their contribution to the project serves as testament to the literacy learning that can occur when activities invite students to use what they already know and instruction helps them move beyond. Research undertaken for the work reported in this article was supported by grant number R117G10015 to the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning and preparation of this report was supported in part under grant number R305A6005 to the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA) by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the sponsoring agency.

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